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ABSTRACT

School reform efforts today have a personal focus that emphasizes attending to the problems faced by individual at-risk students. After outlining the impact of student dropouts, this document uses information from a review of 150 at-risk student programs described in related professional literature to describe six basic weaknesses in current at-risk programs. Most programs reviewed failed to: (1) exhibit a design to meet needs identified via a formal assessment process; (2) integrate effectively with the school's total education program; (3) adequately address the social and emotional needs of at-risk students; (4) offer preventive strategies at the elementary school level; (5) adequately serve the most problematic at-risk students; and (6) address at-risk students' negative perception of the value of learning. A seven-step process for developing administrative strategies to implement programs that would meet at-risk students' needs is described: creating a climate for change; conducting an appropriate needs assessment; initiating organizational changes; assessing organization resources; determining program objectives; designing program components; and implementing the action plan. Last, steps for creating a more caring, supportive, and nurturing educational climate are described. (CLA)

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THE AT-RISK STUDENT: DESIGNING ADMINISTRATIVE STRATEGIES

ADDRESS TO THE 46TH ANNUAL

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In 1983, the National Commision on Excellence in Education rocked America's educational community with its report, A NATION AT RISK. The Commission charged that our national security was being jeopardized by a "rising tide of mediocrity" in our schools. It warned of an impending catastrophe if Americans did not improve the quality of education.

Since then, some noises have been made about educational reform and many states have pumped huge amounts of new money into education, however, little change has occurred. It seems as though educators are either unwilling or unable to respond effectively to the challenges of the Commission. As a result, much of the efforts in this area have been piecemeal and disorganized. This lack of success might well be a result of the fact that school reform began primarily with a push for institutional change. Schools were encouraged, or in some cases required, to raise the level of graduation standards. Throughout the country, professional standards for the preparation of teachers and administrators were raised. New courses and programs were added to an already crowded curriculum.

School reform efforts today, however, seem to have a more personal focus. We have moved from A NATION AT RISK to a new recognition of the problems faced by individual students at-risk.

Students who were already struggling in our nation's classrooms and were being pushed aside in the name of increased academic excellence are regaining our attention. Many of the efforts to meet the needs of at-risk youth have just begun.

The scope of the problem is immense. It has been projected that the dropout problem alone costs $150 billion in lost tax revenues each year. Billions more are required for increased welfare and unemployment benefits. On the individual level, it has been estimated that each dropout loses more than $200,000 in lifetime earnings. With approximately 3,800 young people leaving America's school systems each day, the economic impact of at-risk students is staggering.

Leaving school can also take a devastating human toll on the student dropout. A recent Gallup Poll found that 23 percent of the respondents with less than a high school education were dissatisfied with their personal lives, while only 14 percent of all respondents and only six percent of college graduates felt dissatified. In addition, dropouts tend to have even poorer health.

It is apparent that most educators recognize the tremendous problems that dropouts and troubled youth present both for themselves and society. In 1987, at the 41st Biennial Council of Phi Delta Kappa, delegates overwhelmingly selected the issue of "At-risk/Neglected/Abused Students" as the most critical issue facing education. As a result of the Council's choice, PDK undertook a

two-year project to research the problems and solutions of the at-risk student.

Considering that countless volumes have been written on the subject of at-risk students over the past decade, it is alarming that few, if any, of these books have focused on the need for assiting educators to plan, develop and implement comprehensive at-risk student programs. The emphasis has not been on developing strategic planning for new and innovative approaches, but, has instead, encouraged an almost cosmetic treatment in an attempt to solve the complex and challenging problems posed by at-risk students.

A recent research project I undertook to review current practices in at-risk student programs involved reviewing more than one-hundred and fifty programs described in the current professional literature. The research findings uncovered six basic weaknesses in current at-risk student programs:

1. **Most programs gave little evidence of having been developed as a result of attempting to meet needs identified in a formal needs assessment process.** Instead, most of programs seemed to have been developed in areas where special funding was available. Funding availability, rather than student needs, appeared to be the most important factor in program selection. When needs were considered, there was an apparent reliance more on

generic or generalized needs of the at-risk student, rather than on specifically identifed needs of the student population in the individual school or school district.

2. **Most at-risk student programs showed little or no evidence of being designed for effective intergration into the school's basic and/or total educational program.** This finding appears to be particularly true in regard to instructional programs. Many of the reviewed programs included at-risk student components that could only be described as "add-ons" to existing programs. Most of these special projects were directed and funded outside the mainstream of other district instructional activities.

3. **A majority of the programs emphasized remedial instruction, with only limited attention given to such factors as the social and emotional needs of at-risk students.** While no one would quarrel with the need for new and innovative approaches to improving student achievement, many of the programs appeared to be little more than products of a process of piling on remedial instruction "deeper and higher." Rather, what is needed are programs that address the specific needs of the whole child, with emphasis on alleviating and correcting the

social and emotional problems of at-risk students. Meeting the needs of at-risk students is a complex process, and complex solutions are needed. Instructional remediation is only one needed approach.

4. **Most of the programs provided services for students at only the secondary level, with little emphasis on developing preventive strategies at the elementary school level.** Research has given clear indications that success with school dropouts and underachievers must begin with preventive and remedial efforts at the elementary level. Programs must contain components which emphasize the early identification of at-risk students. They must also design elements which provide for early intervention efforts prior to the time students exit the elementary grades. While secondary programs will continue to be needed, much of the resources and effort devoted to at-risk student programs must be focused on the early primary grades.

5. **Most of the reviewed programs did not deal with the so-called hard-core at-risk students, such as teenagers who have already dropped out of school or have other severe educational problems.** While the success rate is considerably lower with this type of individual than it is with younger or marginal at-risk students, the benefits

of programs that explore innovative approaches to dealing with the hard-core at-risk student will result in greater long-term benefits to society.

6. **A significant number of programs did not address the most pressing and obvious problem: the at-risk student's negative perception of the value of learning and obtaining an education.** Strategies must be developed that instill in youngsters, even in the primary grades, a personal sense of the value and rewards that accompany the learning process. Programs that fail to deal with this element of the at-risk student problem will find only limited long-range success in their efforts.

The strategies outlined in this presentation provide a simple approach to a seven-step process for developing and implementing programs that will meet needs of students indenified as "at-rsik". Basically, the process discussed in this presentation will insure that:

1. Time, money and other resources are being spent on the real problems of at-risk students,
2. Attention is given to each detail essential to solving at-risk student problems, and
3. Continual monitoring of the process is conducted so that change can be implmented as required, rather than waiting until after the programs have failed.

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The seven-step process for developing administrative strategies is as follows:

CREATING A CLIMATE FOR CHANGE. This component will portray change not as a single event or series of events, but rather as a continual process that results in a school climate which meet the needs of all students. Meaningful efforts to assist at-risk youth requies a school climate that not only permits change, but which in fact, support and nurtures innovation.

CONDUCTING AN APPROPRIATE NEEDS ASSESSMENT. Administrators should be encouraged to conduct both formal and informal needs assessment in the effort to identify "Who are the at-risk student?" and "What services or organizational restructuring are essential to meeting these identified needs?" Needs assessment is fundamental to designing significant and meaningful programs.

INITIATING NEEDED ORGANIZATIONAL CHANGES. Based upon the needs identified in the assessment process undertaken in the previous component, changes in the organizational structure must be initiated in order to better meet the needs of the at-risk student population. This endeavor is enhanced through the utilization of decentralization, site-based management and educational renewal.

ASSESSING ORGANIZATIONAL RESOURCES. This component is the process by which administrators survey and inventory internal

educational resources that can be utilized in planning and implementing at-risk student programs. The emphasis must be on identifying both the strengths and contrains of the staff and programs which are conducive to utilization in the total at-risk effort.

DETERMINING PROGRAM OBJECTIVES. This process involves translating identified needs, initiated organizational restructuring and organizational resources into functional objectives for meeting the at-risk students needs. Program objectives must be realistic, economically feasible and obtainable in terms of the district's resources.

DESIGNING PROGRAM COMPONENTS. This step involves the process of developing an action plan to alleviate the at-risk student problem. Utilizing the objectives established in the previous step, a comprehensive and coordinated effort must be designed. The program design must address the needs identified in the assessment process as well as enhance the further development of a climate for change.

IMPLEMENTING THE ACTION PLAN. Effective implementation requires the coordinated and cooperative effort of the entire staff. This process must be undertaken within a framework that encourages the concept of "monitor and adjust". Specific procedures for evaluating individual components of the action plan as well as the entire plan must be build into the implementation strategy.

Each school district should review carefully the educational climate in each of its schools. Many at-risk students feel alienated from their school. They believe that no one cares. A school can become a more caring, supportive and nurturing place by implementing the following steps:

1. Re-examine all discipline policies and practices that may encourage exclusion and/or alientation of students. Alternative disciplinary measures such as "in-school suspension" or "after-hours school" have been used effectively in various school districts. Such an alternative to out-of-school suspension will allow the maintenance of an orderly school environment, but will not cause students to fall behind in their coursework, and lead to other social and academic problems.
2. Review carefully all school attendance policies. The attractiveness and perceived relevance of school can be improved by implementing an assertive school attendance policy. The expulsion of students for lack of attendance is, at best, a paradox. Schools should engage in positive strategies with students who are not in school, including more personalized contact with students.
3. Assess the degree to which the staff members' perception about the high-risk student hinder the effectiveness of any program to assist that student. It is recommended

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that districts assess the working relationship among vocational, academic and guidance personnel in order to identify possible in-service needs. This should include assessment of the staff members' knowledge about the at-risk population. A review should be made of the school's response to the at-risk student population and an evaluation should also be made concerning the effectiveness (or its lack) of existing interventions.